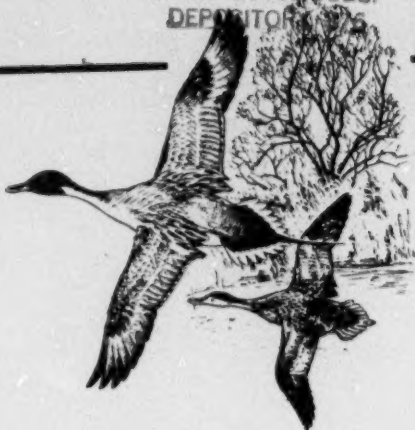


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**A waterfowl
Habitat
Preservation
Program for
the
West
Grasslands**

MERCED COUNTY, CALIFORNIA

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A Wildlife Resource

At one time, four to five million acres of wetland habitat existed in California, mainly in the Central Valley. Most of this has been drained and today, less than one-half million acres remain. This surviving wetland habitat maintains over 60% of the Pacific Flyway waterfowl population during the winter. It also supports outdoor recreation for thousands of sportsmen each year. Of the remaining habitat, seasonally flooded marshes within the Grasslands near Los Banos are some of the most significant. Over 1.4 million waterfowl utilize the area during the fall and winter. It is also one of the most important wintering areas for shorebirds in California.

A Waterfowl Habitat Preservation Program

To assure the preservation of waterfowl habitat within the West Grassland area of Merced County, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has initiated a conservation easement program which provides that the area will remain in private ownership and continue to be managed for waterfowl. The goal is to acquire perpetual easements, on a willing seller basis, on approximately 48,000 acres. Lands within the Grasslands Water District and surrounding native habitat that is being managed for waterfowl will be considered for the program.

What do the easements involve?

The easements are designed to preserve the existing land use condition. To comply with easement stipulations, the landowner cannot alter the land in any way that is detrimental to waterfowl use.

The right of landowners to hunt their property during regular hunting seasons does not change. As in the past, all regulations for the hunting of waterfowl in this area of California will apply.

If the landowners, for some reason, do not put water on the land, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service will have the right to do so, if necessary, to provide wetlands during the important waterfowl wintering period. However, this does not require the Service to flood the property each year and it would be for only that time period stated in the easement.

Landowners participating in the easement program will be able to sell their property if they desire, but the easements will apply to new owners. Landowners will retain the right to graze cattle or lease their lands for grazing purposes.

Mineral rights, including oil and gas, will not be affected by the easement program.

Easements will not be acquired on building sites. If landowners plan to replace old buildings or construct new ones on these sites, they will have the right to do so.

A primary purpose of the easement is to retain the present natural character of the habitat. In keeping with the objective, the growing of agricultural crops on lands under the easement program will not be allowed. If existing croplands are restored to marsh and natural upland vegetation they will qualify for the program.

Does the easement program remove land from the tax rolls?

No, the land remains in private ownership, and payment of taxes will continue to be the responsibility of the landowner.

How is the program funded?

Easements are purchased with funds authorized by the Migratory Bird Conservation Act. The funds come from the purchase of Migratory Bird Hunting and Conservation stamps (Duck stamps) required for hunting migratory waterfowl.

Who will manage the area?

Landowners will continue to manage the area and be responsible for operation and maintenance of facilities. It is expected this will continue to be in conjunction with the Grasslands Water District which has contracted for water supplies for the area. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel will have the right of entry to monitor the program and insure compliance with easement provisions. This will be administered by personnel at the San Luis National Refuge. These personnel will also be available to assist landowners in planning habitat management practices.

Is this program the same as the Water Bank Program?

No, the Soil Conservation Service (USDA) administers the Water Bank Program which is designed to increase waterfowl production and/or improve watering habitat. The two programs are separate. A landowner may sign up for the Water Bank and still sell a conservation easement to the Fish and Wildlife Service.



Where May I obtain additional information?

Inquiries for information may be addressed to:

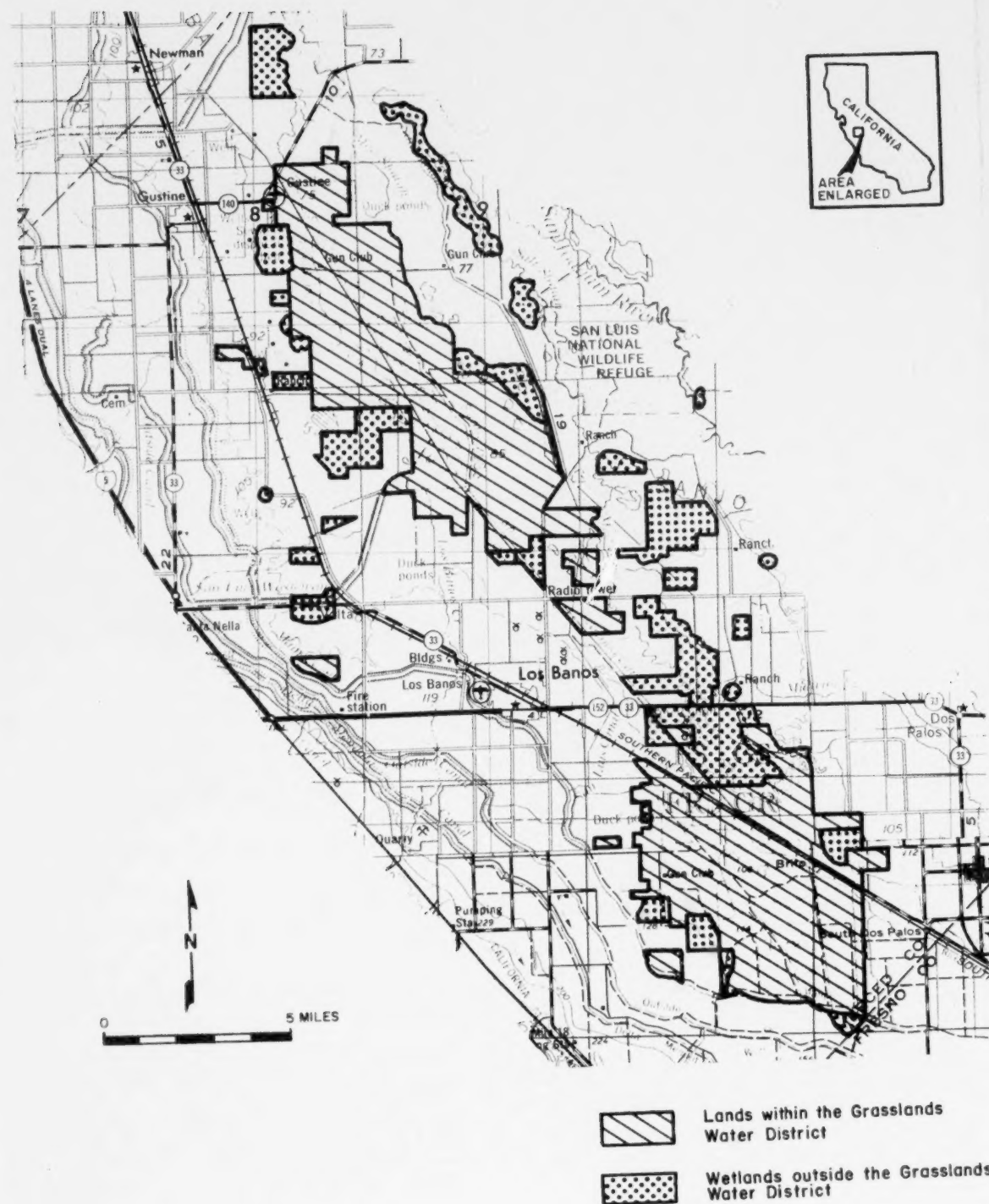
Refuge Manager
San Luis National Wildlife Refuge
P.O. Box 2176
340 "I" Street
Los Banos, California 93635
(209) 826-3508

or

Regional Director (ARW-ACQ)
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
Lloyd 500 Building, Suite 1692
500 N.E. Multnomah Street
Portland, Oregon 97232
(503) 231-6212



best copy available



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

As the Nation's principal conservation agency, the Department of the Interior has responsibility for most of our nationally owned public lands and natural resources. This includes fostering the wisest use of our land and water resources, protecting our fish and wildlife, preserving the environmental and cultural values of our national parks and historical places, and providing for the enjoyment of life through outdoor recreation. The Department assesses our energy and mineral resources and works to assure that their development is in the best interests of all our people. The Department also has a major responsibility for American Indian reservation communities and for people who live in island territories under U.S. administration.

JUNE 1982